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Extension Outreach: Basic Sewing 101 for Extension In-Service Training

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US Land-Grant (LG) universities, originally created by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, have a unique opportunity to offer programming to meet the current needs of clients in the community and state through the Cooperative Extension Service (CES). Created by the Smith-Lever Act (1914), the early CES offered programming in domestic sciences, which encompassed sewing for the family. Home economists were trained to teach sewing skills in youth and home demonstration clubs. In the last fifteen years, however, CES clothing programs and state level clothing specialist positions, have fallen to the wayside at many LG universities.

The purpose in the study is to describe how one LG university used the results of a statewide needs assessment within the CES to return an emphasis to clothing construction programs and education outreach to extension clientele. As a result, an intensive basic sewing skills course was developed to train agents, beginning in 2014. A second purpose is to determine if the intensive in-service sewing training offered to agents is making a difference.

CES administration appointed an existing apparel teaching faculty member to assume an additional contract as state clothing specialist in 2012. The clothing specialist shifted the immediate focus to addressing the lack of basic clothing construction skills possessed by family and consumer sciences (FCS) agents. Most of the recent FCS hires have been in family, child development, food and nutrition, health services, and resource management. Thus, most of the new agent hires have no foundation in clothing-related coursework or experience. Further, most of the agents with the longest tenure in extension who had clothing construction training at the college level are approaching retirement. Many of the agents were unable to answer basic clothing questions from the community, and clothing programs were almost non-existent.

Method

The proposed strategy developed by the clothing specialist was to offer in-service sewing construction training to agents with no sewing skills. After a pilot with the original training group, the curriculum for “Basic Sewing 101” was modified and offered through 7 two-consecutive day training sessions (12 hours each session) throughout a four month period (total of 84 in-service hours). Sewing construction training is different from many CES in-service training programs in that construction involves both cognitive and psychomotor skills, which require much more training time. To facilitate the training for “Basic Sewing 101,” all equipment

and supplies for an effective sewing training program were purchased. Agent trainees, with no previous sewing skill or experience, self-enroll in the training to learn to sew a series of short projects which build on successive sewing skills in training sessions 1-2 (in this order, table runner, reversible hobo bag, apron, and cosmetic bag with zipper application). In sessions 3-5, agents construct a simple dress to fit using a commercial pattern. Sessions 6-7 serve as a form of final evaluation: agents are required to sew a pajama pant commercial pattern with minimal supervision. Finally, agents sew a sample notebook. Training is led by an experienced clothing educator, assisted by FCS agents with extensive sewing construction experience. Members of Master Clothing Volunteers, an extension organization, also assist with training. This allows more one-on-one training with the FCS agents. The training site is rotated around the state for each new class to make training more accessible to agents. At the present, all instruction is offered face-to-face.

Findings and Conclusions

Fourteen agents have completed the training (group 1 in fall 2014 and group 2 in winter 2015). To determine if progress is being made, completers were asked to respond to a 22-item survey through Qualtrics® Online Survey in March 2015. Eight respondents participated. Six of the 8 respondents reported that they had held at least one sewing class since training. Most of the trainings were for 4-H audiences (enrollments from 5 to 50). Only a few adult class offerings were reported (enrollments of 5 or less). Concerning planned sewing classes, 7 of the 8 respondents reported classes to be offered to youth. Only 1 respondent reported a planned basic sewing class for adults. Half of the respondents stated that they anticipate an increase in the number of youth entries in sewing competitions in the upcoming year. Four of the 8 respondents reported that they had sewn one or more new projects since completing training. The most requested assistance (6 of 8 respondents) was for more simple sewing projects.

Preliminary findings from a very limited sample do support that the basic sewing construction in-service training offered to FCS agents is making a difference. Currently, class 3 has begun training and classes 4 and 5 are planned for 2015-16. Future education needs are basic textiles training and more advanced training and refresher training for experienced agents. More advanced topics are adaptable for presentation over the state's interactive video network. The desired outcome is that a core sewing community of trained extension educators will sustain the sewing program around the state. In addition, the seamless cooperation between the CES and teaching side of the LG university is strengthened. This has implications for attracting future students into higher education program in clothing and textiles, based on students' increased exposure to the LG university through CES programs.